

༄༅། །བདེ་ལྷན་མ་ལུང་བསྟན་པ།

The Prophecy of Kṣemavatī

Kṣemavatīvyākaraṇa

འཕགས་པ་བདེ་ལྡན་མ་ལུང་བསྟན་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

'phags pa bde ldan ma lung bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Prophecy of Kṣemavatī”

Āryakṣemavatīvyākaraṇanāmahāyānasūtra



Toh 192
Degé Kangyur, vol. 61 (mdo sde, tsa), folios 243.b–246.a.

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co.

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SUMMARY

- s.1 On their morning alms round, the Buddha and Maitreya meet Queen Kṣemavatī who is bedecked in all her royal jewelry. When the Buddha asks her about the source of such fine jewelry, referring to it metaphorically as fruit, Queen Kṣemavatī explains that her worldly position is the fruit of the tree of her previous good deeds. The remainder of the sūtra describes how one's good actions can eventually lead to buddhahood, and it concludes with a prophecy of the queen's future awakening.

ac.

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- ac.1 Translated by the Subhashita Translation Group. The translation was produced by Benjamin Ewing, who also contributed to the introduction (later completed by the 84000 editors). Lowell Cook checked the translation against the Tibetan and edited the text.
- ac.2 The translation was completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

The Prophecy of Kṣemavatī begins with the Buddha and his disciple, the bodhisattva Maitreya, walking through the city of Rājagṛha on their morning alms round. As they near King Bimbisāra’s palace, they are met by Queen Kṣemavatī, who is adorned with a dazzling display of royal jewelry. The Buddha asks the queen, in a seemingly playful way, for the name of the tree that produced the magnificent fruit that she is wearing. Kṣemavatī continues the analogy by describing her jewelry and her current station in life as the “fruit” borne by the “tree” of her past good deeds accumulated over lifetimes.

i.2

This exchange emphasizes one of the main themes of the text: one’s current situation is the result of previous actions, so if we desire a good future we should persevere in meritorious behavior. This applies not just to ordinary happiness but to spiritual pursuits as well. While Kṣemavatī’s “fruit” might at first seem worldly, she firmly sets the “tree” of her own past and present actions within the framework of the bodhisattva path, with her aspiration to awakening and her practice of the six perfections. The fruit and tree analogy continues throughout the sūtra, with the Buddha describing his own station, that of complete awakening and all its excellent qualities, as also being the result of his past good deeds. His account of his own path reflects that of Kṣemavatī, similar to his even if much less advanced in time.

i.3

The text concludes with Kṣemavatī declaring that she will dedicate all her future good deeds toward reaching buddhahood and thereby be of benefit to all beings. The Buddha responds to this prayer by prophesying the queen’s eventual awakening to buddhahood.

i.4

Kṣemavatī is mentioned in at least one other sūtra in the Kangyur¹ as one of Bimbisāra’s queens. She may well represent the same person as the Khemā who appears in the Pali literature as Bimbisāra’s consort, at first infatuated by her own beauty but later, on meeting the Buddha, becoming an arhat and bhikṣuṇī.² Here, however, she is described as a bodhisattva who has already

embarked on accumulating merit on the initial stage of her “natural career” (*prakticaryā*) and has vowed to attain awakening on the subsequent stage of her “resolution” (*prañidhānacaryā*), as implied in 1.10. In the present narrative she reinforces her previous vow and receives her “prophecy” (*vyākaraṇa*) of future buddhahood from the Buddha himself.³

i.5 Twice in this sūtra, Queen Kṣemavatī aspires to be reborn as a man so that she may continue to progress on her path to awakening. It may be jarring to modern readers to hear the queen lamenting her womanhood, but such attitudes are not uncommon in Mahāyāna sūtras, in some of which it seems to be assumed without question that not only buddhas but bodhisattvas, too, are male.⁴ This sūtra, in which the focus is on a bodhisattva who is a woman, can therefore be seen as belonging to a distinct but quite large genre of texts that counter such assumptions. The genre includes other Kangyur sūtras featuring women bodhisattvas who are also queens or princesses and who, like Kṣemavatī, receive their predictions of future awakening, such as *The Sūtra of Aśokadattā’s Prophecy* (Toh 76), *The Questions of Vimalaprabhā* (Toh 168), *The Questions of the Girl Vimalaśraddhā* (Toh 84),⁵ *The Questions of Vimaladattā* (Toh 77), and *The Lion’s Roar of Śrīmālādevī* (Toh 92), as well as those in which nonroyal laywomen are the main interlocutors, like *The Questions of the Girl Sumati* (Toh 74), *The Questions of Gaṅgottara* (Toh 75), *The Questions of an Old Lady* (Toh 171),⁶ *The Miraculous Play of Mañjuśrī* (Toh 96),⁷ *The Sūtra of the Girl Candrottārā’s Prophecy* (Toh 191), and, notably, *The Prophecy Concerning Strīvivarta* (Toh 190).⁸ In some of these sūtras gender is dismissed as irrelevant or merely notional, yet all these accounts—even those of Strīvivarta and Vimalaprabhā, the most advanced bodhisattvas in their abilities to manifest in different forms—culminate in the prediction that the female protagonist will ultimately become male, at least for the final stages of the path to buddhahood.⁹ So while this sūtra, like the others mentioned, imposes the traditional stance of male primacy, it is perhaps in countering texts that make no mention of women bodhisattvas at all that it is framed as an inspiration to women, and ends with many thousands of women developing the intent to reach buddhahood.

i.6 While the text does not include a colophon that identifies its translators, *The Prophecy of Kṣemavatī* is listed in the earliest Tibetan textual catalog, the Denkarma, so we can say with certainty that it appeared in Tibet at some point during or before the early ninth century CE.¹⁰ Despite being among the main body of sūtras translated in the early period, *The Prophecy of Kṣemavatī* does not seem to have been the subject of any scholarly attention in Tibet. It was translated into Chinese (Taishō 573, *Chamopo di shouji jing*, 差摩婆帝授記經) in the year 525 CE by the Indian monk Bodhiruci, who translated some

thirty-nine Buddhist texts in the early sixth century. *The Prophecy of Kṣemavati* was translated into Mongolian and Korean and is included in the Buddhist canons in those languages. It was translated into French in 1866 by Henri Léon Feer as part of his collection of Kangyur excerpts, and an English translation by Peter Skilling was published in 2021.

i.7 The English translation presented here was prepared based on the Degé Kangyur version of the text in consultation with the Stok Palace manuscript and the Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*).

The Translation

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra

The Prophecy of Kṣemavati

1. The Prophecy of Kṣemavatī

[F.243.b]

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was residing in Rājagṛha on Vulture Peak together with a large monastic congregation of twenty thousand monks and many bodhisattva great beings including Maitreya and Mañjuśrī. [F.244.a] At dawn, the Blessed One donned his robes, picked up his alms bowl, and, together with the bodhisattva great being Maitreya, went to the city of Rājagṛha for alms. As they progressed through their rounds in the city of Rājagṛha, they neared the palace of King Bimbisāra. From atop the royal residence, King Bimbisāra’s queen, Kṣemavatī, could see the Blessed One approaching from a distance. Filled with joy at the sight of the Blessed One, Kṣemavatī descended from the palace and laid out ornate cushions made of white silk for the Blessed One and the bodhisattva great being Maitreya. The Blessed One and the bodhisattva great being Maitreya seated themselves on the seats that had been prepared for them, and Kṣemavatī, bedecked in all her jewelry, bowed her head at their feet. So that she might hear teachings on the Dharma, she sat before the Blessed One with great respect and reverence for him.

1.2 The Blessed One saw Queen Kṣemavatī bedecked in all her jewelry and, although he knew the answer, addressed her in order to benefit all beings. He asked, “Kṣemavatī, what is the name of the tree that bears the kind of brilliant, dazzling, shining fruit that adorns your body?”

1.3 Queen Kṣemavatī answered the Blessed One with the following verses:

“The great being has asked,
‘What is the name of the tree
That bears the fruit you wear?’
Even though, great hero, you already know. [F.244.b]

- 1.4 *“It is called the tree arisen from the merit
Generated in the past.
Guide, these fruits I now enjoy
Are from a tree such as that.*
- 1.5 *“This very same fruit tree
Belongs to disciples of the Buddha.
Those who wish to obtain the wisdom of a buddha
Sit before it in order to awaken.*
- 1.6 *“Watered with generosity and discipline,
This fruit tree has been well tended.
And when it fully blossoms,
It will bear sublime fruits.*
- 1.7 *“With the powers of patience and diligence,
I have carefully tended this fruit tree,
And when it blossoms,
It will bear flawless fruits.*
- 1.8 *“This tree is beautiful to behold,
Covered with flowers of concentration and insight.
Guide, all that I enjoy
Is the fruit of that tree.*
- 1.9 *“Just like trees
Rooted in the mountains
Have outstretched limbs and leaves
That they spread far and wide without moving,*
- 1.10 *“In that way I carefully tended
This excellent broad fruit tree in the past
By seeking the essence of buddhahood
With the aim of benefiting all beings.*
- 1.11 *“Guide,¹¹ this tree of merit
Will have many more fruits besides.
I will experience more
Than the mere flowers.*
- 1.12 *“I will attain the fruits of that tree—
Supreme awakening,
The unsurpassed awakening of a buddha.
When I leave this lowly station of womanhood behind,*

- 1.13 “I will be reborn as a man
Who is sublime among all beings,
Has perfected all qualities,
And is all-knowing and all-seeing.
- 1.14 “I will liberate those beings
Who are oppressed by suffering,
And become a compassionate refuge
For the denizens of the world.”
- 1.15 The Blessed One responded, “Kṣemavatī, [F.245.a] you have acted to bring benefit and happiness to many people and have compassion for the world. You have acted for the sake of the vast assembly of beings, for the happiness and benefit of gods and humans alike. Excellent, excellent indeed!”
- 1.16 “Blessed One,” Queen Kṣemavatī replied, “the Blessed One has the thirty-two major and eighty minor bodily marks of a great being, the ten powers of the thus-gone ones, the four fearlessnesses, the four special modes of knowledge, the eighteen unique qualities of a buddha, great loving-kindness, great compassion, great joy, and great equanimity. Where do all of your qualities come from? And, furthermore, where do the unfathomable, inconceivable, immeasurable, ineffable, incalculable qualities of the Buddha come from?”
- 1.17 The Blessed One answered Queen Kṣemavatī with these verses:

“Desiring the wisdom of the buddhas
In order to benefit all beings,
I too, in the past, have done nothing
But carefully tend such a tree.
- 1.18 “I gathered generosity, discipline, patience,
And likewise diligence and concentration.
For a long time, I applied myself
To absorption and insight.
- 1.19 “Beings have biased minds,
Yet my mind is impartial
Without needing to be cultivated.
Thus I discovered buddhahood itself.
- 1.20 “With an impartial mind
That equalizes
Beauty and ugliness, friend and foe,
I grew the tree of merit.

- 1.21 “As a result, this broad tree
Gained many excellent qualities.
I attained the state of a universal monarch
And the level of Śakra. [F.245.b]
- 1.22 “I surpassed the many-formed Maheśvara,
And even Brahmā himself.
I realized the characteristics
Of the inconceivable features of buddhahood.”
- 1.23 After hearing of the qualities of the Blessed One, Queen Kṣemavatī praised
the Blessed One’s well-spoken teaching and rejoiced, offering these verses:

“Just as the supreme human, the excellent one,
With his endless ocean of qualities,
Trained his conduct in the past,
So will I train.
- 1.24 “As you have perfected all qualities,
I train to emulate your qualities.
Abandoning the suffering of existence,
I too will become like that.
- 1.25 “I fully dedicate
All the generosity I cultivate
In all my subsequent lives
To the attainment of unparalleled wisdom.
- 1.26 “I fully dedicate
All the discipline I maintain
In this life and any other
To the attainment of the wisdom of the buddhas.
- 1.27 “I dedicate
All the patience, diligence, absorption,
Insight, and virtue I cultivate
To be of benefit to the Buddha’s teachings.
- 1.28 “All the virtuous deeds I accrue
Through body, speech, and mind
I dedicate to awakening,
For the sake of the wisdom and qualities of the buddhas.
- 1.29 “May I leave this woman’s body behind
And take the supreme form of a man.

- Upon attaining the body of a man,
May I become the most sublime of beings.
- 1.30 “Once that has come to pass, I will turn
The unsurpassed wheel of the well-gone ones.
I will free the masses of beings
Who are trapped in the prison of saṃsāra.”
- 1.31 The Blessed One then offered his approval to Queen Kṣemavatī with this
verse:

“Those words were well spoken,
Your mind is well disciplined,
And you have subdued Māra well! [F.246.a]
You will awaken to perfect buddhahood!”
- 1.32 Queen Kṣemavatī was joyful, elated, and jubilant. Filled with joy and delight,
she offered the Blessed One and the bodhisattva great being Maitreya plenty
of food and drink until they were satisfied. After the Blessed One put away
his bowl and washed his hands, he gave Queen Kṣemavatī extensive
Dharma teachings, encouraged her to uphold them, inspired her, delighted
her, and then made this prophecy:
- 1.33 “In the future, Kṣemavatī, many eons from now, you will become a thus-
gone, worthy, perfected buddha, a teacher for gods and humans. You will be
a blessed buddha known as Guṇaratnaśrī, and your buddha field will be
supremely pure. It will be free of the suffering of descending to lower
rebirths and the lower realms. It will be an abode of beautiful, pleasant, and
supremely pure bodhisattvas. Such will be your buddha field.”
- 1.34 As this teaching was given, many thousands of laywomen developed the
intent to reach unexcelled, perfect awakening. Thousands of beings and
many gods and humans obtained the light of the Dharma.
- 1.35 When the Blessed One had finished speaking, Queen Kṣemavatī, her
retinue, and the entire world with its gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas
all rejoiced and praised what the Buddha had taught.
- 1.36 *This concludes the noble Mahāyāna sūtra “The Prophecy of Kṣemavatī.”*

ab.

ABBREVIATIONS

C Choné

H Lhasa

J Lithang

K Kangxi

K_Y Yongle

N Narthang

S Stok Palace

n.

NOTES

- n.1 See *The Absorption of the Thus-Gone One's Wisdom Seal* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/UT22084-055-005.html#UT22084-055-005-138>) (*Tathāgatajñānamudrāsamādhi*, Toh 131).
- n.2 See Malalasekera 1937 and *Khemātherī Apadāna* (Thi Ap 18).
- n.3 For a brief summary of these stages in a bodhisattva's career as set out in the *Mahāvastu*, see the introduction to Dharmachakra Translation Committee (tr.), *The Good Eon (Bhadrakalpika)*, Toh 94, 2022, i.11 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh94.html#UT22084-045-001-14621>) and n.6 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh94.html#UT22084-045-001-14622>).
- n.4 See for example Roberts (tr.) *The King of Samādhis Sūtra* (Toh 127), introduction i.24 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh127.html#UT22084-055-001-32>). In her book *Women in Buddhism* (p. 169) Diana Paul identifies three ways in which Mahāyāna sūtras deal with the question of female bodhisattvas and buddhas. While most deny the possibility of buddhahood in a female body, some implicitly deny that women can be bodhisattvas at all, some accept that women may be “lower-stage” bodhisattvas, and some accept that women may potentially be “advanced” bodhisattvas whose buddhahood is “imminent.”
- n.5 See Karma Gyaltzen Ling Translation Group, trans., *The Questions of the Girl Vimalāsraddhā* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh84.html>) (Toh 84), 2021.
- n.6 See Sakya Pandita Translation Group (International Buddhist Academy Division), trans., *The Questions of an Old Lady* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh171.html>) (Toh 171), 2011.
- n.7 See Jens Erland Braarvig, trans., *The Miraculous Play of Mañjuśrī* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh96.html>) (Toh 96), 2020.

- n.8 See Dharmachakra Translation Committee, trans., *The Prophecy Concerning Strīvivarta* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh190.html>) (Toh 190), 2021.
- n.9 A notable exception to the seeming constancy of such outcomes can be seen in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (see Roberts, trans., *The Stem Array* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh44-45.html>), Toh 44, chapter 45, 2022) in which advanced female teachers appear with no mention of their eventual need to become male.
- n.10 See Denkarma, folio 299.b and Herrmann-Pfandt, p. 119.
- n.11 Reading 'dren pa from K_Y, J, K, C, H, S in place of 'dren pa'i.

b.

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g.

GLOSSARY

g.1

Asura

lha ma yin

ལྷ་མ་ཡིན།

asura

A class of nonhuman beings who are engaged in a mythic war with the gods (*deva*) for possession of the nectar of immortality. In Buddhist cosmology, they inhabit the realm neighboring that of the gods, from which they observe the gods with intense jealousy.

g.2

Bimbisāra

gzugs can snying po

གཟུགས་ཅན་སྡིང་པོ།

Bimbisāra

King of Magadha who lived at the time of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

g.3

Brahmā

tshangs pa

ཚངས་པ།

Brahmā

A high-ranking deity who presides over a divine world where other beings consider him the creator; he is also considered to be the lord of the Sahā world (our universe).

g.4

Eighteen unique qualities of a buddha

sangs rgyas kyi chos ma 'dres pa bco brgyad

སངས་རྒྱས་ཀྱི་ཚོས་མ་འདྲེས་པ་བཅོ་བརྒྱད།

aṣṭādaśāveṇīkabuddhadharma

Eighteen special features of a buddha's behavior, realization, activity, and wisdom that are not shared by other beings.

g.5 Eighty minor marks

dpe byad bzang po brgyad cu

དཔེ་བྱད་བཟང་པོ་བརྒྱད་ཅུ།

asītyanuovyañjana

A set of eighty bodily characteristics borne by buddhas and universal emperors. They are considered “minor” in terms of being secondary to the thirty-two major marks of a great being.

g.6 Four fearlessnesses

mi 'jigs pa bzhi

མི་འཇིགས་པ་བཞི།

caturvaiśāradya

The four types of fearlessness possessed by buddhas: They have full confidence that (1) they are fully awakened, (2) they have removed all defilements, (3) they have taught about the obstacles to liberation, and (4) they have shown the path to liberation.

g.7 Four special modes of knowledge

so so yang dag par rig pa bzhi

སོ་སོ་ཡང་དག་པར་རིག་པ་བཞི།

catuḥpratisamvid

The four correct and unhindered discriminating knowledges of (1) the doctrine or Dharma, (2) meaning, (3) language, and (4) brilliance or eloquence. These are the essential means by which the buddhas impart their teachings.

g.8 Gandharva

dri za

དྷི་ཟ།

gandharva

A class of generally benevolent nonhuman beings who inhabit the sky and are most renowned as celestial musicians.

- g.9 **Guṇaratnaśrī**
yon tan rin chen dpal
ཡོན་ཏན་རིན་ཆེན་དཔལ།
Guṇaratnaśrī
The name of a future buddha.
- g.10 **Kṣemavatī**
bde ldan ma
བདེ་ལྷན་མ།
Kṣemavatī
One of the wives of King Bimbisāra. May possibly be the Khemā of Pali literature.
- g.11 **Maheśvara**
dbang phyug chen po
དབང་ཕྱུག་ཆེན་པོ།
Maheśvara
An epithet for the god Śiva.
- g.12 **Maitreya**
byams pa
བྱམས་པ།
Maitreya
A bodhisattva destined to be the buddha of the next epoch.
- g.13 **Mañjuśrī**
'jam dpal
འཇམ་དཔལ།
Mañjuśrī
A great bodhisattva. As one of the eight “close sons” of the Buddha, he is the embodiment of wisdom.
- g.14 **Rājagrha**
rgyal po'i khab
རྒྱལ་པོའི་ཁབ།
Rājagrha

The capital of the ancient kingdom of Magadha.

g.15 Śakra

brgya byin

བརྒྱ་བྱིན།

Śakra

Alternate name for Indra, the lord who rules the Heaven of the Thirty-Three.

g.16 Ten powers of the thus-gone ones

de bzhin gshegs pa'i stobs bcu

དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པའི་སྟོབས་བརྒྱ།

daśatathāgatabala

A category of qualities that are distinctive of a thus-gone one. They are as follows: knowing what is possible and what is impossible; knowing the results of actions or the ripening of karma; knowing the various inclinations of sentient beings; knowing the various elements; knowing the supreme and lesser faculties of sentient beings; knowing the paths that lead to all destinations of rebirth; knowing the concentrations, liberations, absorptions, equilibriums, afflictions, purifications, and abidings; knowing previous lives; knowing the death and rebirth of sentient beings; and knowing the cessation of the defilements.

g.17 Thirty-two major marks of a great being

skyes bu chen po'i mtshan sum cu rtsa gnyis

སྐྱེས་བུ་ཆེན་པོའི་མཚན་སུམ་རུཚ་གཉིས།

dvātriṃśanmahāpuruṣalakṣaṇāni

The thirty-two major signs of a buddha that manifest as specific physical attributes to indicate the perfection of the awakened state of buddhahood.

g.18 Universal monarch

'khor los sgyur

འཁོར་ལོས་སྐུར།

cakravartin

Literally “wheel wielder,” this denotes a powerful being who has control over vast regions.

g.19 Vulture Peak

bya rgod phung po'i ri

བྱ་རྗོད་ཕུང་པོའི་རི།

Gr̥dhrakūṭaparvata

Name of a hill close to Rājagṛha. It is famous as the place where the Buddha is said to have taught the Prajñāpāramitā and other teachings.